

Stephen Lawrence Day – notes for teachers

Resources distributed to schools across the UK to help educate about Stephen Lawrence and the themes of racism, anti-racism, institutional racism, justice, social action.

1. Introduction

Stephen Lawrence is a name that will be forever etched in British history. A symbol of the changing axis of Race Relations in Britain during the 1980's and 90's. It is not only a story about the politics of identity, belonging, and inclusion. It's a tale of justice and equity in the evolving landscape of a nation wrestling with its contempt for difference. It is also a story of social transformation and hope - a reminder of where we have come from, and the vision of where we need to be.

London in the 80's could be tumultuous for Black people. Migrants would often face discrimination because of their Race. There had been 30 years in the steady migration of "West Indians" from the Caribbean. Sometimes these hostilities came from neighbours or people in our communities, sometimes it came from state institutions. Black people would be denied housing, jobs, and subject to poor education. Sometimes it was in the form of abuse and violence.

In more recent years this might have been hard to comprehend - when Black people and Black culture have become more publicly celebrated and our communities more tolerant and welcoming. But in 2026 with the rise of far right, anti-immigrant rhetoric spreading across the world, including here in the UK, we are reminded of previous decades. The 80's was a time when far right political parties and organisations like the National Front (NF) or BNP (British National Party) would regularly promote hate speech and call for the repatriation of ethnic minorities. Immigrants were seen as taking jobs from locals, and the cause of high unemployment amongst the white majority. It is in this context that the

Stephen Lawrence story must be understood. Britain was a hostile environment.

In this lesson, there are various sociological dimensions that overlap, each as important as each other. The first is about the identity of Stephen himself, an inspirational young man with big ambitions for life. Then, there is the question of how we build societies that treat people as equal before the law. Thirdly, there is the question of what more can be done to achieve a nation where the colour of one's skin is no longer a barrier to live in peace and realise one's potential. These dimensions provide us all powerful lessons as individuals and improving social relations in Britain. It encourages us to reflect on the importance of justice, perseverance, and societal reform.

Let us start with having a look at Stephens life.

2. Learning Objectives

At the end of this lesson students will be able to:

1. Be Inspired by his life goals and work ethic as a young man.
2. Engage in discussions about Race, identity, and belonging from a sociological perspective.
3. Explore the meaning and complex issue of institutional racism.
4. Understand basic concept of diversity and understanding the importance of social change through activism.
5. Discuss the strategies used by Black activists to fight for equality

6. Develop a deeper cultural understanding of Black communities from the Caribbean from the 60's - 90's.
7. Evaluate and discuss the historical narratives on racial justice in the present day.
8. Assess the legacy of Stephen Lawrence and his ongoing impact on British society.

3. Who is Stephen Lawrence?

Stephen Lawrence, an 18-year-old Black British citizen from Plumstead South-East London, was born on 13 September 1974 at Greenwich District Hospital. He was the son of Neville and Doreen Lawrence and the eldest of three children who emigrated from Jamaica in the 1960s - the others being Stuart (born 1976) and Georgina (born 1982). His father was a carpenter, upholsterer, tailor and plasterer. His mother, Doreen, a qualified special needs teacher.

Stephen's home, personality, and school life were shaped by his faith and education; for years he attended and was christened at Trinity Methodist Church in Woolwich. As a young child he was good at most subjects in school but favoured art and design. That's because he loved to draw and paint. He also had a talent for maths, and was part of the 34th Woolwich Cub Scouts where he won accolades in everything from cooking to sailing.

As Stephen grew older, like most young people, he was busy juggling school work with an active social life and family commitments. He was industrious and determined to have a positive impact on his community. As well as his interest in design he was also a budding entrepreneur. At 16 he co-founded a small business designing and selling T-shirts, caps and jackets of well-known bands, rappers, and politicians such as Malcolm X. He also had a taste for clothes and was known to be a flamboyant dresser. Stephen loved the arts, and

music, particularly soul and R&B – and at one time he worked as a film extra alongside famous actor Denzel Washington in the film *For Queen and Country*.

In his teenage years, Stephen excelled at running, even competing for the Cambridge Harriers Athletics Club and once running for Greenwich. He did cross country and participated in the Mars Mini Marathon, proudly coming 181st in the Boys 11-13 category. He was a diligent, hard-working boy who knew what he wanted in life. It was during this time that he set his heart on becoming an architect, a career path that was also a dream for his dad. He enjoyed going out with his best friends Elvin, Jason, and Dwayne Brooks.

At 18 Stephen was studying A-levels in English, design and technology, with physics at Blackheath Bluecoat; and English language and literature at Woolwich College. The plan was to do his A-levels before going on to university to train in architecture. His family even helped him find work experience with architectural firm called Arthur Timothy. Stephen's mother Doreen would later famously remark *"I would like Stephen to be remembered as a young man who had a future. He was well-loved and, had he been given the chance to survive, maybe he would have been the one to bridge the gap between black and white because he didn't distinguish between black or white. He saw people as people."* So, what could go wrong? What could stop Stephen achieving his dreams? What happened to such an exemplary young man with his whole life ahead of him.

To answer these questions, we must recall what London (and Britain) was like in the 80's and 90's. In the introduction we used the word "tumultuous", but what does that really mean? In a nutshell, Racism. Racism in the 80's and 90's used to frequently occur. On 17th January 1981 racists petrol bombed a birthday party in New Cross Road Deptford that killed 13 Black youths in a house fire. By 1993 there had been three racist murders in Stephen's area, Rolan Adams, Orville Blair, and Rohit Duggal, plus more later in the decade like Manish Patel, Lahkvinder 'Ricky' Reel, and Sheldon Bobb. This had been happening since Caribbean migrants began arriving in the 50's. The 1959 murder of 32 year-old

Antiguan Kelso Cochrane in West London in was another case in point. That's why in 1965, the government had to pass what was known as the Race Relations Act to protect immigrants from discrimination. The act made it illegal to refuse housing, public services, and employment on the grounds of a person's ethnicity. The Act was extended in 1968 and 1976, resulting in the right to take discrimination complaints to civil courts or industrial tribunals. The government also set up the Commission for Racial Equality in 1977, an NGO (non - governmental organisation) to monitor and promote racial equality and address racial discrimination.

Despite this a lot of ordinary people had similar views to the NF (National Front) and BNP (British National Party). They despised ethnic minorities who they felt were ruining the country. Blacks were stereotyped as lazy, criminal, and degenerate - as people undeserving basic civil rights. White people wanted minorities go back to their own country. What they didn't realise was that one of the major Caribbean Islands that Black people were coming from, Jamaica, was part of the British empire until 1962. Thereafter it was part of the commonwealth. Black immigrants could hold British passports. Black immigrants were entitled, and invited, to come here and work.

These feelings of being outsiders had been felt for many years. At the time Human Rights Watch reported Britain as the country with the highest incidence of racial attacks in Europe. Inner city schools had been disproportionately expelling young Black youths. Unemployment within Black communities, especially in areas with high Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslim populations stood above the national average, and people felt a sense of powerlessness. Some of this type of discrimination would come directly from racist members of the police. Officers would often stop and bundle Black youths into the back of police vans to beat them. Black and Asian communities would live in a state fear and subordination; never truly free from the terror of being racially abused.

However, Stephen had never been involved in any wrongdoing or criminal activity, and although his mother used to talk to him about the dangers of staying clear of the police, he had never been in any sort of trouble. He had never been arrested or even spoken to the police. He never had any dealings with them at all. Stephen was a normal, handsome, young Black boy gifted with maturity and charm from a close, stable, law-abiding family until his life was cut short by a viscous racist attack in Eltham South London 1993.

4. 22nd April 1993

On the night of Thursday 22nd April 1993, around 9pm, Doreen arrived back in London from a short trip. She had told Stephen to be home between 10 and 10.30om but he had yet to arrive. After watching the 10 o'clock news, there was a knock at the door. Neville opened to a neighbour (Joseph Shepherd, an eyewitness with his father and brother) who had come to tell them Stephen had been attacked. He didn't know how seriously Stephen had been hurt, all he said was it was at the bus stop by the Welcome Inn pub.

Stephen had been at a bus stop on Well Hall Road, in Eltham, with Dwayne waiting for the 122 to go home when a group of white youths ambushed him in a sudden unprovoked knife attack. Two five-inch-deep stab wounds severed arteries in his collarbone and shoulder, puncturing his lung as they shouted racial slurs like n****er and Black b****rd. As the attackers disappeared down Dickson Road, Dwayne and Stephen ran towards Shooters Hill where he collapsed 130 yards from the incident. Dwayne ran to call an ambulance while an off-duty police officer stopped his car and covered Lawrence with a blanket. However, tragically, he was pronounced dead on arrival at Brook General Hospital. Soon after his parents would arrive to hear the fatal news. Stephen had been murdered in cold blood.

5. The Fight for Justice - Investigation and Failures

In the days, weeks, and months after his death the police grossly mishandled the crime scene and investigation – failing to gather or respond to vital evidence. For example, Stephen had not been given medical assistance by the officers who arrived as first response. Instead, they assumed him and Dywane had been in fight and questioned as a suspect. Three days later, the police had over 70 anonymous tip offs that the killers were part of the local gang called the ‘Eltham Craze’, but it took them four days to visit the suspects' homes. One woman who might have been a vital witness telephoned detectives three times and appealed for them to contact her, they did not - and despite surveillance capturing a suspect leaving his house with a black bin bag days into the investigation (presumably carrying evidence) it took the police two weeks to make an arrest. It seemed as if they refused to believe the attack had been racially motivated. In fact, arrests were only made a day after Nelson Mandela, the famous activist, humanitarian, and president of South Africa had visited the Lawrence family to support a campaign for justice. This gives you an indication of how much the news of Stephens death had hurt people all over the world, not just people in Britain.

At first brothers Jamie and Neil Acourt, along with Gary Dobson were arrested. A few days later David Norris surrendered himself and was arrested, later, Dwayne

would recognise Luke Knight an ID parade, and he was arrested too. At last justice would ensue for Stephen, or so it seemed.

What really ensued was a long fight for justice, a struggle by his family's unwavering determination and courage. Their heroic efforts exposed the individual and institutional racism in Britain. A struggle that still goes on to this day.

In July 1993, after arresting the five suspects, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) decided not to press charges citing not enough evidence. This decision left Stephen's family devastated, but also more resolute. In August 1993 a coroner's inquest opened to uncover the cause of death but was quickly adjourned when the Metropolitan Police started an internal review of their own investigation called the Barker Review. In November, despite growing public and family concerns, that review reported that the police had done a satisfactory job. *"Satisfactory?"* Doreen Lawrence asked. *"How can such blatant injustice ever be satisfactory?"* In December 1993, the coroner's inquest reopened.

Stephen's family continued to push for answers, refusing to let the case die. In July 1994 Doreen and Neville filed a private prosecution against three of the suspects (Neil Acourt, Jamie Acourt, and Gary Dobson). Being a private prosecution, it didn't qualify for legal aid and so was funded by the "Lawrence Family Campaign". A fund which Stephen's parents founded in June to raise money. This was a bold step because a private prosecution for a racially motivated attack had never been attempted before. The Lawrence family simply refused to give up, and in September 1994, a year and half after his death the private prosecution was officially launched against the suspects. A lawyer called Michael Mansfield QC led a voluntary legal team to take on groundbreaking case. During a "committal" hearing in August 1995, he presented fresh evidence that the magistrate concluded Neil Acourt, Luke Knight and Gary Dobson could stand trial. The decision hinged on secret surveillance footage recorded by a hidden camera in the flat of one of the suspects. It showed them brandishing

knives and bragging about violently killing other Races. It was clear the gang had extreme racist views. In April 1996, a long-awaited trial would begin.

The trial was tense, and in one hearing the courtroom sat silently as Dwayne Brooks, Stephen's friend who witnessed the attack gave his testimony. Unfortunately, his evidence as a key witness was deemed insufficient, and the judge instructed the jury to find the defendants not guilty. His identification of the suspects was seen as inadmissible. To the anguish of Stephens family, the private prosecution collapsed, and the suspects were acquitted.

Despite this Stephens family continued to campaign for justice, launching the Ribbon Campaign at the House of Commons the same month. Although heartbroken, Doreen and Neville vowed "*We will not stop until justice is served*" – and in February 1997, when a coroner's inquest substantiated the claim that Stephen Lawrence was unlawfully killed in an unprovoked racist attack there was a glimmer of hope. Dramatically, the Daily Mail newspaper printed photos of the suspects on their front page calling them murderers with a challenge to sue if the claim was untrue. This further captured the nation's attention. In March 1997 the police Complaints Authority (PCA) also announces it would carry out an investigation into the case. Public outrage was now strong, and this also in part led to the then Home Secretary Jack Straw announcing a judicial inquiry into the case in July 1997. In March 1998, a public inquiry, led by retired High Court Judge Sir William Macpherson, began working to uncover the truth about what went wrong and recommend ways to prevent similar failings in future. It was a turning point, and now the Lawrence family's persistence was forcing change at the highest levels of the establishment.

6. Justice Served

This was now one of the most high-profile murder cases Britain had ever seen. When the public inquiry opened, for the first time, the failings of the Metropolitan

Police were laid bare for the world to see. The inquiry was not just about Stephen; it was also about the systemic issues in policing and racism in Britain. In advance of the public hearings Sir William ordered the original five arrested must give evidence and that if they refuse, they would be liable for prosecution. A BBC news report called *'one of the most important moments in the modern history of criminal justice in Britain'*.

When the findings were published in February 1999, the Macpherson Report as it became known determined unequivocally that Stephen Lawrence's murder investigation was plagued by *"a combination of professional incompetence, institutional racism and a failure of leadership by senior officers."* Macpherson also made a host of recommendations to those findings, one of which being a partial repeal of 'double jeopardy rule' in murder cases if "fresh and viable" new evidence was discovered. The "double jeopardy rule" is a law preventing suspects from being trialed twice for the same crime. This meant that In May 2011, the Court of Appeal could allow the suspects' to be re trialed. There was DNA evidence from a coat found in 2010 that was not part of the original trial in 1996.

Based on this fresh forensic analysis, almost twenty years later, on 3 January 2012, two members of the group responsible for Stephen's murder, Gary Dobson and David Norris, were found guilty of his murder.

They were later sentenced to life imprisonment with minimum terms of 15 years 2 months and 14 years 3 months respectively. Although the Police now believed other members of the teenage gang were involved the other three original suspects brothers Neil and Jamie Acourt, and Luke Knight were not brought to trial and convicted.

In 1994 Stephen's cremated ashes were buried beside his great grandmother in Clarendon, Jamaica. He rested there until August 2024 when Doreen announced his body would be returned to the UK to be closer to his family.

7. Landmarks and Legacies - Macpherson to the Race Relations Act

Stephen's murder was motivated by racism, how the police treated his family and friend Dwayne was racism. Racism is what scarred his family and the ethnic minority communities of Britain. That is why the case became such a major symbol in the fight against racial injustice. Despite the pain of losing Stephen his family's courage and persistence forced Britain to confront its racism.

Published in Feb 1999, the Macpherson report became a moment of reflection and change. It made 70 recommendations of major reforms to the justice system in England and Wales. The Home Secretary immediately accepted and committed to implementing most of them. It acknowledged one of the groundbreaking ideas to come out the US Black Power movement in the 1960's - "institutional racism". A term coined by US activist Stockley Carmichael to describe *"the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin."* This type of discrimination arises through *"unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racist stereotyping,"* creating significant disadvantages for minority ethnic communities. Macpherson rejected the explanation that police incompetence or the racism of a few "bad apples" within the Metropolitan Police

Service (MPS) were responsible. Instead, it concluded that the failures in the investigation were part of a deeper problem in the Met Police.

Acknowledging institutional racism, however, was just the beginning. Genuine change required institutions to accept the existence of the racial problem and work collaboratively with ethnic minority communities to end it. Macpherson called on all organisations to scrutinise their policies and practices to ensure they weren't inadvertently causing harm or disadvantage to sections of society. The inquiry brought all of this to the forefront of public discussion.

in the wake of the report, Prime Minister Tony Blair promised radical reform and significant changes in policing and the legal system. In December 1999 the government introduced a bill to amend the Race Relations Act 1976 to cover the police and all public authorities. It prohibited direct discrimination by all public authorities. The bill prohibiting both direct and indirect discrimination by all public authorities and imposing on public authorities a statutory race equality duty. This amended act was immediately seen as a ground-breaking equality law, not only for Britain but internationally.

Other recommendations included the need to consider representation in the police, along with the need for more accurate teaching of Britain's diverse history and place in the world. All this aligned with the Stephen Lawrence Charitable Trust founded by Doreen in 1998. The Trust set-up as a national educational charity committed to creating a positive legacy for Stephen. It provides educational and employability workshops and mentoring schemes for young people through a program called Architecture for Everyone. It's an initiative to promote architecture and the creative industries to young people from minority backgrounds. Since 2000 it has helped countless young people realise their ambitions to become architects. The trust also issues bursaries to young people with families on low income. The Marco Goldschmied Foundation in association with the Royal Institute of British Architects later established an annual

architectural award in Stephen's memory. The Stephen Lawrence Prize as it is known, also intended to encourage fresh, emerging talent into architecture.

As well as the Trust, in 2008, the Stephen Lawrence Centre, designed by world renowned Black architect David Adjaye, was opened in Deptford, Southeast London to give thousands more young people an opportunity to nurture their creative talents.

In 2016, Baroness Doreen Lawrence (as she became known), became Chancellor of De Monfort University where she loaned archival materials on the history of her family's fight for justice. The university used those materials to develop the Stephen Lawrence Research Centre; another initiative creating impact through research-led initiatives on a local, national and global scale.

At the memorial service to celebrate his life on the April 2018, the 25th anniversary of his murder; the then Prime Minister, Theresa May, announced an annual national commemoration called Stephen Lawrence Day was to be held each year on 22 April. Also speaking at the memorial service, Doreen Lawrence made a statement that Stephen Lawrence Day would be *"an opportunity for young people to use their voices and should be embedded in our education and wider system regardless of the government of the day"*.

Stephen Lawrence Day invites schools and their communities to use the memory of Stephen's life and legacy as an opportunity to empower young people in their care to live their best life. We invite you to do that too.

In 1995 a memorial plaque was set into the pavement at the spot where he was killed on Well Hall Road

8. Conclusion

Years after he had passed, Doreen Lawrence once reminded the world that: *"Stephen's life mattered. His legacy will bring change"* and that is what happened. This would be the dawn of a new Britain. The concept of institutional

racism that became central to the case became an important term to describe systemic failures of public bodies and institutions. This challenged a policing culture that dismissed race as irrelevant to way we treat people. It recognised that is more than Individual's who could discriminate against other Races. This is an idea we still use. Stephen Lawrence underscores the importance of acknowledging and addressing institutional, not just individual acts of racism.

9. References and Resources

1. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-16284890>
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/jan/03/stephen-lawrence-doreen-mother-statement>
3. <https://www.dmu.ac.uk/research/centres-institutes/stephen-lawrence-research-centre/a-challenge-to-conscience-a-legacy-of-hope.aspx>
4. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5802/cmselect/cmhaff/139/13914.htm>
5. <https://web.archive.org/web/20121231182303/http://www.stephenlawrence.org.uk/about-us/stephens-story/>
6. <https://wearencs.com/blog/uk-black-history-decade-1990s>
7. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ncPttnBXcZQ&t=11s>
8. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=95Unekl3TOI&t=4s>

